

"A harsh new wisdom is struggling to be born."

Richard Harwood, Page C2

"His detractors are impatient with symbolism."

Sidney Hertzberg, Page C3

"If the bugle sounded, they would serve."

William Greider, Page C5

Two Reassessments

By Michael Harrington

Harrington, a leading American Socialist, is the author of "The Other America," which helped launch the War on Poverty.

JOHN F. KENNEDY grew in office. That is the key to his tragically brief presidency.

I did not vote for Kennedy in 1960. I stupidly repeated an old leftist cliché, that Democrats and Republicans are peas in a pod, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, and refused to vote for either major candidate.

I recall that blunder for a reason: to emphasize that I do not look back on the Kennedy years as a nostalgic exile from Camelot. Even though I understood early on in his administration that I should have voted for Kennedy, I attacked him for his escalations in Vietnam, his hesitations in civil rights and on many other issues. On Nov. 22, 1963, when I heard the unbelievable news in Milan, I was nearing the end of a year in Europe, anxious to come home and make amends for 1960 by campaigning for him in 1964. I write, then, as a man of the left who was forced against his own prejudices to recognize John Kennedy's contribution.

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By Richard J. Whalen

Whalen, a former aide to Richard Nixon, is the author of "The Founding Father," a biography of Joseph P. Kennedy.

TEN YEARS after his assassination, John F. Kennedy has entered history and the common American tradition. Enshrined in granite, postage stamps, and schoolroom portraits, the martyred President "who died too young" is part of the past that belongs to every citizen.

Less certain, however, is the status—indeed, the definition—of the Kennedy political legacy. It is not even clear to whom it will belong in the future.

The presumptive beneficiaries, of course, are Sen Edward M. Kennedy and the Democratic Party. But their claim, on inspection, proves surprisingly disputable. If the Kennedy legacy is little more than a memory of a distinctive personal manner and "style," Teddy is the heir and can prove it by merely opening his mouth. But if the legacy is more substantial, consisting of positions upheld, policy themes stated, values exemplified and virtues celebrated, there ought to be a fairly clear resemblance between what Kennedy stood for and what the present-day Democratic Party stands for.

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The claim I make for his historic significance is both restrained and major. Within the limits of the possible, as defined by his own pragmatic liberalism and the reactionary congressional power arrayed against it, he developed to a surprising degree. How far he would have gone, we will never know. (Robert Kennedy, who survived his brother by a little less than five years, spent them in making the most extraordinary pilgrimage a practicing politician has ever traveled. What if John Kennedy had had those years too?)

John F. Kennedy, in short, must be judged not as a shining knight nor as a failed hero but as a man of his time and place. He did not, by my standards, move nearly far enough in confronting the problems of this society; but he did go so much farther than one could have expected.

He was not, of course, a radical and it is silly to accuse him, as some of his disillusioned followers have, of not having carried out basic transformations of the system. That was never his intention and had it been the people would not have elected him President.

Began With a Disaster

AND YET, within the context of his political and personal limitations, John F. Kennedy grew enormously. He arrived at the White House a young, and not terribly distinguished, senator from the Eisenhower years with a tiny margin of victory and a Dixiecrat-Republican majority against him in the Congress.

The America which inaugurated him, in January, 1961, still believed in the verities of the Cold War (as did Kennedy in his speech of that day), in the sanctity of the balanced budget, and it had not begun to come to terms with that great mass movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. The America which mourned John F. Kennedy in November, 1963, was different. It was not transformed — but it was better. That was Kennedy's modest and magnificent achievement.

In foreign policy, he began with a disaster: the Bay of Pigs. It is true that, new and untried, he endorsed a truly incompetent (and immoral) plan on the grounds that it had been approved by every one of his military experts. That mitigates his responsibility but it certainly does not absolve him of it. However, he himself insisted on his own fault in the matter. He did not do so in the style of Richard Nixon, asserting that he is to blame for Water-

gate and then filling the record with statements making it perfectly clear that he does not believe that for a moment. Kennedy accepted his failure straightforwardly.

That fact affects how I look upon Kennedy's most portentous and destructive error, the escalation of the American presence in Indochina. That was done in consonance with the standard liberal position on the Cold War (which, because it was liberal, often had to represent itself as even tougher and more realistic than conservative anti-communism).

However, there were those within his administration—the then ambassador to India, John K. Galbraith, among them—who warned the young President of the mortal danger in committing American power to a reactionary dictatorship in Saigon. Here, too, Kennedy listened to his military advisers who had begun their annual sighting of light at the end of the Vietnamese tunnel. He was wrong to do so and his mistake cost this country and the Vietnamese and the world quite dear.

Flawed Foreign Policy

YET I BELIEVE that Kennedy, had he lived, would have reversed his course. I have no historical evidence on this count. Rather, I base myself on his reaction to the Bay of Pigs. John F. Kennedy was a man who could learn from his disasters (unlike both Nixon and Lyndon Johnson who compound them by pretending they do not exist).

It is on the basis of this aspect of his personality that I am convinced that he would not have indefinitely gone on escalating the war in Vietnam. Kennedy changed in office—a quality singularly lacking in both his successors.

If I am thus at least understanding with regard to his two most dramatic allures, I do not share the conventional judgment that the Cuban missile crisis was his finest hour. That his terrifying episode was handled with skill and great coolness is obvious. But that it took place at all is proof of how flawed our foreign policy—Kennedy's and Eisenhower's and Truman's—was.

There were moments during that week in 1962 when the President of the United States left it up to the leader of the Soviet Union and his associates as to whether a good part of the world would be blown to bits. It might be plausibly argued that, given the prior history of the Cold War, that eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation was unavoidable. But then one must add that the prior history had an insane logic.

I wonder if the real denouement of the Cuban missile crisis was not Kennedy's American University speech in June, 1963. It was, I think, the most revealing illustration of his capacity for growth. In it he abandoned the Cold War pieties upon which he had campaigned in 1960 and acted in 1961 and 1962.

Nine years before Nixon's voyages to Peking and Moscow, Kennedy proposed that there be an end to the nuclear polarization which threatened the future of the globe. The concrete result of that move was, of course, the Moscow test ban treaty. Like so much else in the Kennedy years, we know that event as a promise, an anticipation, not a fulfillment. But it represented an extraordinary, and welcomed, break in American policy, as well as an example of how a President can change.

Important Departure

THERE IS ONE other Kennedy foreign policy initiative which is relevant to this analysis: the Alliance for Progress. It was, I thought at the time and think now, basically flawed in its strategy. It assumed that there could be a liberal capitalist revolution carried out non-violently in Latin America by a united front of oligarchs, workers and peasants encouraged by financial aid from the United States.

That seriously overestimated the reform potential of the Latin upper classes as well as their commitment to democracy and social change. But if the actual strategy was condemned to failure, the vision which animated it was an important new departure in American policy.

On two counts, then, Kennedy's foreign policy initiated basic new departures: in proposing an end to the Cold War and negotiating the Moscow treaty; in arguing for American support for a democratic revolution in the Third World. In the first case, Kennedy laid the basis for a detente which was not realized until Nixon; in the second, he articulated a vision which has yet to be acted upon. In both in-

stances, he demonstrated a remarkable capacity for change and growth, for the Alliance was a response to the Bay of Pigs and the Moscow treaty an answer to the Cuban missile crisis. The President learned.

Cautious Moves

ON DOMESTIC issues, the crucial question during the Kennedy years was civil rights. In 1960, there had been the sit-ins; in 1961, the Freedom Rides. During the 1960 primary campaign, Kennedy had been the first (and only) Democratic hopeful to make personal contact with Martin Luther King Jr., and during the general election he had made his famous intervention to help get King out of jail.

But between 1960 and the March on Washington of 1963, he moved most cautiously in this area. There were the confrontations in the schoolhouse door and support from the Justice Department, under Robert Kennedy, for the Freedom Riders. But there was not that "stroke of the pen" which Kennedy had said would allow the President to put all the power of the federal government behind the drive for racial equality.

Kennedy's argument in defense of his moderation was that his hands were tied by the Dixiecrats and their Republican congressional allies. That, I am sure, was an element in his conduct, yet it does not alter the fact that he responded much too slowly in 1961 and 1962 to the most decisive moral and political issue of the decade.

In 1963, however, the President began to move. In response to King's struggle in Birmingham, the White House became much more positive and in August, 1963, when the delegation from the March on Washington came to Kennedy, he was prepared to move on a fair employment practices provision in the upcoming Civil Rights Act.

In all of this there was, I think, a considerable amount of learning going on. Robert Kennedy had been truly shocked when he met with a group of black activists and intellectuals and



Virginia country home, Nov. 10, 1963—John F. Kennedy Library photo

realized how critical they were of his, and his brother's, actions. Moreover—and this is quite important—the mood which Kennedy created was one in which the civil rights movement could thrive.

First to Talk Sense

IN ECONOMIC management, John Kennedy was the first President to talk a modicum of sense to the Ameri-

can people. It is hard to remember, now that President Nixon is a Keynesian (albeit a shamefaced and therefore bumbling Keynesian), that in the early '60s most citizens had a pre-modern view of the economy.

In a famous speech at Yale, and in his pushing for a tax cut, Kennedy began to explain that the United States of America is not a household to be run on a balanced budget, but a complex society in which a tax cut could, by setting off economic growth, actually result in larger tax revenues.

To be sure, Kennedy did not live to see the fulfillment of his interim goal of reducing unemployment to 4 per cent, but he clearly was the man who began the economic education of the American people and who laid the foundation for Lyndon Johnson's full employment policy.

Still, even that accomplishment had its limitations, almost all of them imposed by political constraints. Kennedy had opted to stimulate the economy through a tax cut rather than through social spending, even though George Meany, Walter Reuther and other trade unionists wanted him to take the latter course.

As a result, the tax cuts which he initiated, and President Johnson carried out, disproportionately favored the rich and the corporations. Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger has written, intended to take the social spending route in his second term when he thought he would be much stronger politically. The assassin put an end to that hope.

In another area, putting a man on the moon, almost all liberals and leftists would criticize, if not condemn, Kennedy. I do not.

First of all, it is glibly assumed that the monies spent on space technology could easily be transferred to, say, the struggle against poverty and urban decay. In fact, that is not the case.

Secondly, I believe there is an imperative for mankind to live up to its fullest potential, to move forward, to penetrate the unknown. One may argue on the details of how that is going to be done, for instance making the case for unmanned rather than manned exploration. But since we have the resources both to go to the moon and to cope with the earth, I am glad that John Kennedy posed his somewhat romantic, but yet fundamental, challenge to space. Sometimes in the not too distant future I suspect we will learn that it was a necessary gamble, one that will benefit generations yet to come.

But finally, I cannot conclude my

assessment of the presidency of John F. Kennedy as if it were a matter of balancing accomplishments and failures in a kind of political cost accounting. For the reason those years are remembered with nostalgia by the American people transcend the details of what went on during them. It has more to do with a spirit.

The nation was happier then. It had,

God knows, problems, but they seemed solvable. And then, after John Kennedy was murdered, the war in Vietnam took charge of the nation's destiny and dragged down Lyndon Johnson's administration. And now there is an unpopular President presiding over the most shocking corruption the nation has ever known.

Atmosphere Changed

I WAS WRONG in not voting for Kennedy in 1960 for many, many reasons, but perhaps the most important of them bears on what I now take to be the basic accomplishment of his tragically short incumbency.

Since there was a President who could grow in office, who could learn from the Bay of Pigs and the missile crisis, who could come to understand that we had to move decisively as a nation in response to the just demands of black America, the mood, the political atmosphere of these United States changed in January, 1961. It was that intangible which was perhaps most important.

Had Kennedy lived, there would have been much more that was specific and concrete in terms of legislation enacted. And perhaps what makes one so sad on the 10th anniversary of Dallas is the sense of the promise that was not permitted to fulfill itself.

The rich young senator from Harvard went to West Virginia in the 1960 primary and saw the poor there as he had never seen them before. He became President, but he did not forget.

Then, in 1963, he realized that he had not yet acted on the convictions which grew out of that West Virginia experience. And so he set people to work in his administration to prepare an assault on poverty. They had not finished their preliminary report by Nov. 22, 1963. Like so much else, that was something he was only allowed to begin.

I do not want to sentimentalize the memory of John F. Kennedy. That might make it burn brighter for a moment or two, but it would not protect it from the merciless scrutiny of history. I only want to make my modest, major claim on behalf of his presidency. He did not transform America; he left most of its problems unsolved; he committed some egregious errors.

But he learned, he changed, he grew. His legacy is not so much a program or a legislative shopping list. It is that, hampered by severe political constraints, he did get the nation moving again. Not far enough, but moving. The country was better when he was cruelly assassinated than on the day he took the oath of office.

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Alas, there is not. And when the late President's younger brother pronounces on public policy, the family tie is apparent but their political kinship is not. The Kennedy legacy, it seems to me, must go to probate.

The left-liberal Democrats, Edward Kennedy prominently included, have disowned their party's recent past, as personified by President Johnson. But the insurgency against the Vietnam war and the Johnson presidency went much further and cut much deeper than the Kennedy loyalists anticipated. It cut all the way to the root-truth of the matter: Johnson's great "crime" was to adopt Kennedy's worldview, retain Kennedy's advisers, pursue Kennedy's policies, and honor Kennedy's commitments to the bitter end.

And so, when the insurgency finally triumphed with the 1972 nomination of Sen. George McGovern, the moral condemnation of the McGovernites fell on LBJ and JFK alike. Significantly, as the Democratic Party turned itself into a movement dedicated to purging its past, only one candidate, Sen. Henry M. Jackson, dared propose continuity of U.S. policy, and he was cast into darkness as an unrepentant Cold Warrior and superhawk.

Legacies Disowned

WITHIN THE LITERARY and intellectual realm, where Kennedy's adroit flattery once prevailed, an anti-Kennedy revisionist campaign is far advanced toward the objective of leveling Camelot. A typical judgment is Richard J. Walton's ("Cold War and Counter-Revolution: The Foreign Policy of John F. Kennedy"): "As congressman and senator, Kennedy was never a liberal, and as President he prosecuted the Cold War more vigorously, and thus more dangerously, than did Eisenhower and Dulles."

Thus, on both the political and the intellectual front, the left has not only de-mythologized Kennedy (which is a healthy enough ambition) but has also declared war on his view of the world and the assumptions and policies he acted on to secure America's place in it. This, it seems to me, is an unhealthy enterprise which must be resisted. For the perils against which Kennedy rallied the American people have since multiplied to an alarming degree.

Can Sen. Jackson and like-minded moderates pull the Democratic Party back toward the center and reconcile it with both the Kennedy legacy and the realities of a dangerous world? I doubt it. Experience teaches that when a party transforms itself into an

ideological vehicle, and true believers take the wheel, even an election debacle produces only a limited corrective reaction. In the atmosphere created by the Watergate affair and the collapse of the Nixon presidency, the McGovernites are apt to be more self-righteous and intransigent than ever. And more determined to regard JFK as at least half a villain.

The relevant experience with ideological binges, of course, is Republican, vintage 1964. In spite of their champion's crushing defeat, Sen. Barry M. Goldwater's followers, true believers and therefore returning delegates, held the decisive power at the 1968 Republican convention. On orders from Goldwater, Strom Thurmond and other conservative leaders, these delegates trooped unenthusiastically to the banner of Richard M. Nixon, whom many of them had never trusted. Now, too late, senior Republican conservatives have acknowledged the Nixon betrayal and are moving toward a confrontation with the President, before he carries the Republican Party over the brink to ruin.

The Vital Core

WHAT THE Nixon administration has done, among many other things, is to destroy the new Republican "past" even before it could be recorded in the history books. Future GOP orators will not point with pride to these years. Where their immediate political heritage should be, Republicans will face a void.

To be thus deprived is intolerable to conservatives, whose natural home is yesterday. But where can they turn? Certainly not all the way back to Eisenhower, for that was long ago and, besides, Ike had a running-mate. Where then? Republicans are rather shameless borrowers of Democratic ideas and programs after they have aged. Why not co-opt a President seemingly unwelcome in his own party? It is entirely conceivable to me that Republicans in the future will avail themselves of what now seems a free-floating resource—the Kennedy legacy.

Not all of it, to be sure, and not under the old labels. Quite apart from

those right-wingers who have forgotten little and forgiven nothing about the New Frontier, moderate conservatives too are still put off by the memory of Kennedy's splendid fakery, the arrogance of his courtiers, and the transparent improvisation of bold initiatives that were swiftly forgotten. But we have endured much worse in the White House during the past five years. "Style" doesn't matter. What matters crucially is the core of the Kennedy legacy.

That core is patriotism. From the first to the last of his thousand days in the presidency, Kennedy told his fellow citizens that America was a good country which could become better. He expressed the faith they felt in themselves, their values and their ideals. He called for individual and national sacrifice on behalf of those ideals, and this struck a deep chord among young people. They were also drawn by his urging that the society pursue and honor excellence.

In the early 1960s, we remained innocent of the supposed evils of "elitism." Ordinary citizens were unoffended by the idea that they might elect better and abler men to govern them. The reign of mediocrity in Washington since 1969 has done much to restore the vitality of the idea that some men are better equipped to govern than others. There is nothing wrong with government by "the best and the brightest"—provided their qualities include character.

John Kennedy had character. Though as quick to exploit an opportunity or hedge a promise as the next professional politician, he showed in many ways that he understood where politics ended and principled commitment began. The skepticism that intellectuals found so attractive in him was accomplished by an anchored faith in lasting things—family, church, friendship, duty, loyalty and courage—which ordinary men and women recognized and approved. When he assumed responsibility for a blunder—the Bay of Pigs is the classic instance—he did so unequivocally, because he knew it was right and necessary.

An Inner Strength

CONTRARY TO his revisionist critics, Kennedy did not heat up the Cold War to prove his virility. He accepted the reality of great-power conflict, sure to continue far beyond his term, and he therefore accepted the challenges, especially in Central Europe and in this hemisphere, that were

his responsibility. Although liberal admirers have made much of Kennedy's speech at American University in June, 1963, in which he called on the Soviet Union to sign the limited test-ban treaty and help "make the world safe for diversity," he did not foresee an early or dramatic "end" to the Cold War, but rather a protracted test of wills which might gradually yield to accommodation. Just 16 days after his disarmament speech, Kennedy stood at the Wall in Berlin and proclaimed his solidarity with the Berliners and his dedication to "the advance of freedom everywhere."

Such rhetoric carried weight in that era because we possessed the strength to match our obligations. Kennedy inherited unquestioned military superiority—the "missile gap" he had campaigned against closed almost as soon as he entered the White House. He heeded the advice of Walter Heller and adopted tax and fiscal policies that stimulated the sluggish economy. Most of all, our society felt an inner strength and confidence.

In remarks prepared for delivery in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963, Kennedy was in a position to say: "... America today is stronger than ever before. Our adversaries have not abandoned their ambitions, our dangers have not diminished, our vigilance cannot be relaxed. But now we have the military, the scientific and the economic strength to do whatever must be done for the preservation and promotion of freedom."

This is no longer true. Indeed, America today is weaker and more vulnerable than ever before. Our political system has been subverted, not by foreign enemies, but by weak, corrupt men who came to power barren of unselfish purpose. Idealism has vanished from public life, and the people regard all politicians with distrust.

There is no "conservative" or "liberal" remedy for this sickness of the national spirit. The cure will come from honest, truthful leadership that summons the best in us—as we remember John Kennedy once did. His legacy awaits the leader who can claim it.